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The Protestant Cause:

Natalie Zemon Davis' Use of Religion in *The Return of Martin Guerre*

It is a well-known idea that history, as a discipline, is inherently interpretive and never isomorphic with the past. Historians are not direct reporters of past events, for there is no way to revisit and relive the time period of interest; instead, historians use pieces of what has been left behind to retell the story in the way they see fit. Natalie Zemon Davis' *Return of Martin Guerre* is a perfect example of this interpretive nature – the author consults myriad primary and secondary sources pertaining to the story of the Guerre family, and then uses critical reading to draw unexpected conclusions regarding the events that transpired. A number of these conclusions are based on possible character motives like monetary gain, love, and the topic to be discussed here, religion. In my paper, I will argue that Natalie Zemon Davis includes Protestantism in *The Return of Martin Guerre* in order to present an interpretation of character motives that supports her “against the grain” reading of primary and secondary sources on the subject. Davis asserts that the Reformed Church and its relatively relaxed view of marriage and confession appealed to Bertrande de Rols and Arnaud du Tilh, who she concludes were enamored conspirators in the imposture. By discussing several main assertions in the work, I will illustrate the way Davis employs Protestantism with varying evidentiary support to shape and validate her own argument.

First, Davis' uses Protestantism to support her argument that Bertrande was a willing participant in Arnaud's act of deception. Near the beginning of the work, she claims that Arnaud and Bertrande felt that Protestantism and the Reformed Church provided justification for their

relationship. Protestantism was just beginning at the time, spreading along the routes of trade - it allowed for marriage without a priest or other witness, and encouraged direct counsel with God, eliminating confession as a necessity and allowing the couple to justify their relationship more or less independently from the strict moral laws of the time. Davis is able to prove through primary sources that Arnaud was *not* Protestant before moving to Artigat, but the evidence that he and Bertrande were devoted Protestant converts mostly consists of circumstantial interpretation: "... this tradition offered... no quick solution... But it did allow [Bertrande and Arnaud] the possibility of... marriage that was in their hands to make" (Davis 47). This passage uses irresolute language to persuade the reader to agree with the author, as does the rest of the section about Bertrande and Arnaud's relationship – many arguments are made with lead-ins like "so one must surmise", "I doubt", and "such an action may have", indicating that Davis is unable to directly justify her argument through citation. The evidence of the Rols family converting to Protestantism appears to be sound, since their attendance at services was recorded by the church, but the speculative nature of Davis' supporting evidence indicates that Protestantism is primarily used to validate the guesswork involved in reporting the characters' personal motives.

The next example of Davis' constructed use of Protestantism is her portrayal of the conflict between Pierre Guerre and Arnaud. Due to the citations from the records of Judge de Coras, among other sources, it is obvious that Pierre was not in agreement with Arnaud's attempts to profit from leasing and selling Guerre land and that the two were generally at odds. It seems unnecessary, historically speaking, to make any other arguments to illustrate this idea. Given the discussion of Arnaud and Pierre's relationship relative to Protestantism, it is arguable that Davis inserts a religious subtext for the sole purpose of highlighting the rivalry: "If I were to hazard a guess... the sympathizers tended to believe the New Martin and the Catholics tended to

believe Pierre Guerre” (56). This section, as indicated by the tentative language of the explanation, is more or less pure speculation that was included exclusively to amplify the sense of a rift between the two men. It is intended to convey that Pierre Guerre and his peers in the community were wary of the returning Martin’s incongruent behavior, while Arnaud, Bertrande, and their peers were accepting of these changes. It may be that Davis is attempting to explain the quarrel on a deeper level, or simply that she is adding to their constructed personalities in order to create dynamic character traits, thereby bringing life to a story whose participants can no longer be reached for comment on the matters at hand. In all, the allusion to a religious rift does not directly affect the progression of the story, but it does illustrate a nuanced example of Davis making her argument appeal to the reader.

The final example of Davis’ persuasive use of religion lies in the last several chapters of the work – Protestantism is used to interpret an alternate view of Judge de Coras’ personal feelings about Arnaud and the trial. Davis claims that de Coras is initially hesitant to condemn Arnaud to death because he identifies with the man on personal and, as the author stresses, religious levels. She uses the Protestantism connection to shape her argument about de Coras’ uncertainty about the case. In discussing Jean de Coras, Davis says that when the judge met Arnaud du Tilh, “he recognized a man with some of his own qualities... If I am right that [Arnaud] was a Protestant sympathizer, Coras would have had... [to believe him]” (Davis 102). Again, Davis’ cautious language indicates her uncertainty in stating these assertions as fact. The claim is also based on the assumption that Arnaud and Bertrande were indeed Protestant sympathizers, which cannot be objectively proven through primary and secondary sources either. It can be inferred, then, that Davis includes the idea of de Coras seeing himself in Arnaud du Tilh to further support her “against the grain” reading of the judge’s records and personal accounts of

the case. While Davis' scenario regarding de Coras and Arnaud is certainly possible, there is no real way of knowing whether or not her more abstract claims are valid.

In all, it is arguable that Davis' primary motivation for including Protestantism in *The Return of Martin Guerre* was to support her highly interpretive conclusions about the story. The new religion provides partial explanations for, among other things, Arnaud and Bertrande's moral decision to stay together, Pierre and Arnaud's rivalry, and Jean de Coras' sympathy for the couple during the trial. These highlighted examples are not intended to imply that Davis' historical method is flawed – to some degree, all history is subjective and all historians interpret past events through their own experiences and preconceptions. Instead, the purpose of examining Davis' method is to understand the process of recounting the past and to be aware of the way its authors construct history, a realm we usually consider to be static and absolute. Perhaps there are other historical accounts that would benefit from such a critique; it is impossible to know which parts of our history are fact and which are speculation without examining them through a critical objective lens.

Work Cited

Davis, Natalie Zemon. *The Return of Martin Guerre*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983. Print.